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Sarty's Identity: A Rupture of Family Ties

In William Faulkner's story "Barn Burning," a ten-year-old boy, Sarty develops his own identity as he is trying to resolve the conflict between his loyalty to Abner, his father and accepted social norms of justice. Sarty is being raised in the south by a very poor white family around the year of 1895, about 30 years after the abolishment of slavery. The family represents the plight of sharecroppers who have no prospects of improving the conditions of their life. They work on farms of rich landowners who pay them a meager portion of their crops. In such circumstances Abner adheres to his own system of "justice" often manifesting his anger by burning landowners' barns. In the process, he traumatizes and tyrannizes his young son, Sarty, and propels him toward manhood prematurely by continually putting Sarty in a position to choose between his father's idea of justice and his own. Sarty is constantly being pulled in two different directions; in this way, Faulkner presents "the classic conflicts of good versus evil, son versus father, and individual versus familial identity" (Ford). Sarty's final resolution of this conflict marks his coming of age.

The conflict between Sarty and his father is so strong because Abner Snopes puts such an emphasis on being loyal to the family at whatever cost. Had he not been so emphatic about this, Sarty would be able to make his decisions based on his morals, but at the beginning of the story, Abner does not leave Sarty a choice in the matter; he is to "stick to [his] own blood" (Faulkner 330). However, already in the opening scene, the reader can see Sarty's conflict. On the one hand he loves and respects his father, but on the other he does not want to lie in the court. Therefore he has to remind himself that father's "enemies" are his, Sarty's "enemies" as well. Reading the passages one learns that, "Abner had threatened to torch Mr. Harris's barn, but the Justice of the Peace hesitates to question Sarty,

the only available witness. Instead of compelling the young boy to testify, against his father, the Justice of the peace banishes Abner from town" (Ford). Family is very important. Even the Justice of the Peace recognizes that family is all that the Snopes have so he decides not to have Sarty testify against his father. Abner realizes the favor and reprimands Sarty later that night because he knows that his son would have told the truth and potentially put him in jail for setting the barn ablaze.

In the scene where Abner is scolding Sarty for almost telling the truth in the courtroom, the reader is shown Sarty's thoughts and response to lying to other people for his family's sake:

> Young Sarty—repulsed by his father's iniquity, yet powerless before his father's implacable malice—hesitates to acquiesce. The narrator highlights Sarty's profound reluctance by delaying the inevitable, the moment when the young boy must concede to his father's wrath to survive. (Ford)

Sarty is distracted with his own thoughts when Abner is teaching him the life lesson of "stick[ing] to [his] own blood" (Faulkner 330). He is thinking about what the people in the courtroom, specifically the Justice of the Peace, really wanted; "they wanted only truth, justice" (Faulkner 330). The reader can imply that this is also what Sarty wants because he is so lost in thought, and because he was very close to telling the Justice of the Peace what really happened. However, Sarty's revealing the truth to the Justice of the Peace does not sit well with what Abner believes. He does not think that the legal system really listens to the true problem: the horrid treatment of poor whites caught in the perpetual poverty of the sharecropping system. They will never be able to improve their status with this profession, and there is no program in place to help those stuck in such circumstances.

Sarty, however, stands very far from his father's views. A little while later, he toys with the idea that if his father paid some sort of penalty for carrying out his own justice system (whether it be money or crop), that he may "stop forever and always from being what he used to be" (Faulkner 335). Unfortunately, Abner continues exacting wrongs done to him in his own fashion and does not change the way that Sarty wishes he would.

According to Max L. Loges, Abner Snopes's trait of his supposed loyalty to the family stems from his military history. He is, "depicted as a man who is loyal to no one other than himself or his family (which is a mere extension of himself)" (Loges). Abner may have joined the Confederate Army as Sarty implies, but soon deserted the army to steal horses. Abner would capture and sell them to whomever would buy, but Sarty never learns this fact. Abner Snopes's character validates blue-blooded brutality, and in so doing abuses his family. Instead of taking care of his family's needs by keeping a job, Abner "squelches any attempt for social reform or communal identity" by putting himself first and seeking revenge against the richer class (Ford). Abner believes that his profession of tenant farming is almost a form of quasi-slavery because of the way he is treated as the hired hand. The family lives in houses similar to those used for slaves when slavery was legal. They are not paid in money for his labor. They are paid with a very small portion of the crop that they help to produce.

Those who oppose Abner and give him orders contrary to what he believes or wants to do are in danger of getting their barn burned to the ground. This pattern troubles Sarty because he feels that his father's view of justice is not just. Thus, Sarty feels torn between his own beliefs and his father's orders. Sarty knows that everyone is just looking for the truth and for the justice system to exact wrongs done. When he sees his father acting in revenge, Sarty becomes uneasy. The first barn burning scene in the story shows that an African American man is sent ahead of the fiery blaze to warn the barn owner. The lack of an African American being sent to the second barn burning then becomes the deciding factor for Sarty to turn against his father.

In the closing scenes of "Barn Burning," Abner is getting ready to torch Major de Spain's barn. The point at which Sarty decides to tell de Spain of his father's intentions is when Sarty realizes that his father is breaking his own moral code by not sending a warning. He is just going to burn the barn without notice. Sarty thinks that Major de Spain should at least be warned of the trouble he is in. Yet, initially he is still obeying his father and running to get the oil for burning de Spain's barn. At the same time he thinks that he follows, "the old habit, the old blood which he had not been permitted to choose for himself, which had been bequeathed him willy nilly and which had run for so long (and who knew where,

battening on what of outrage and savagery and lust) before it came to him" (Faulkner 337). The next moment however, Sarty manages to confront his father. He does not want to continue down the path of destruction as his father has. Moreover, since Abner has broken his own moral code, it is easier for Sarty to break away from his father. Sarty may not have been able to choose who his father is, but he has made the decision to not let his father govern the rest of his life. He will no longer succumb to the false hero he once thought his father was; Sarty will make his own way in the world.

After warning Major de Spain of his barn burning, Sarty hears three gunshots and he presumes that his father is dead. He is gripped "with a sense of guilt for betraying his father; amidst his grief, the young boy refines their relationship by replacing the endearing cry of 'Pap! Pap!' with the formal cry of 'Father! Father!'" (Ford). By using "Pap," Sarty is showing his familial attachment and personal relationship with Abner; when he transitions to using "Father," Sarty is distancing himself from the man and giving him the basic biological role of father with no personal connection. Sarty has decided to mark his own path and leave his family at this point. The last line of the short story suggests that the older, more mature version of Sarty is now invulnerable to his father's vengefulness because the narrator remarks that, "[Sarty] did not look back" (Faulkner 339).

In William Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning," Sarty is torn away from his family because what he believes does not coincide with what his father believes. Abner Snopes believes in taking justice into his own hand and exacting revenge and Sarty cannot sit idly by while his father gets away with it. Sarty Snopes desires truth even if it comes at the highest cost: separation from his family. He cannot tolerate his father's volatile behavior any longer and finally decides to set out on his own.

Works Cited

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